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AUTHOR Wolverton, Mimi; Macdonald, R. Timothy
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ABSTRACT

The U.S. may be experiencing a shortage of qualified applicants for the superintendency. Highly qualified candidates often do not want the job. Underrepresentation of women in the superintendency confounds the problem. This study was conducted to determine the most commonly exercised path to the superintendency in the Northwest. Career trajectories were compared between male and female superintendents, and certificate holders who are not superintendents. Commonalities were sought between the routes chosen by current male and female superintendents. Career choices of potential superintendency applicants were examined to determine whether they were gaining requisite types of administrative experience. Results show that aspects of the job, such as stress, politics, and low pay differential, influence many candidates away from applying. Women commonly see themselves in support roles and positions lower than the superintendency, which strongly correlates with a lack of career advancement. The model path to the superintendency from a high school principalship is followed more by men than by women. The pool of candidates for the superintendency may decrease over the next 10 years as more people decide against applying for a highly stressful position. The shortage of applicants would be exacerbated if female administrators are stopped by an administrative ceiling to their career ladder. (Contains 35 references and 4 tables.) (RT)

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Women in the Superintendency: Barking Up the Wrong Chain of Command?

By

Mimi Wolverton
University of Nevada Las Vegas

and

R. Timothy Macdonald
Washington State University

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Women in the Superintendency: Barking Up the Wrong Chain of Command?

by
Mimi Wolverton
and
R. Timothy Macdonald

Increasingly, popular literature suggests that the U.S. is experiencing, or will in the near future, a shortage of qualified applicants for the superintendent position (AASA, 1999). Highly qualified candidates often simply do not want the job (Cunningham & Burdick, 1999; Cooper, Fusarelli & Carella, 2000; McAdams ,1998). Under representation of women in the superintendency confounds the problem. Current pools of administrative candidates come from practicing teachers (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, 1999), and the majority of teachers are women. Yet few women are found in the superintendency. Of the 2,262 superintendents responding to the 2000 AASA superintendent survey, only 297 (13%) were women (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000). The situation in the northwestern region of the country mirrors closely that of the rest of the United States. In a regional study of superintendents in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington, only 13% of the 522 superintendents who participated were women (Wolverton, Rawls & Macdonald, 2000).

In school districts, there are several gateways an individual must pass through prior to the superintendency. Conventional wisdom dictates that a candidate must survive the classroom as a teacher, usually engage in some sort of a certification process, and take on at least one intermediary administrative position before ascending to the superintendency. The types of positions assumed determine the experience gained, which in turn adds to or detracts from an individual's marketability as a viable superintendent candidate (Forbes and Piercy, 1991; Konrad & Pfeffer, 1991).

In the northwest, the marketability of newly minted certificate holders may prove a moot point. According to policy makers, familiar with the situation in the northwest, many superintendents are leaving their current positions via retirement[1] and joining local consortia of superintendents. Increasingly, school boards and search consultants are using these consortia (consisting almost entirely of white men) as candidate pools rather than the younger, newly credentialed candidates. The motivation behind such a move follows the old adage—a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Retired superintendents are known quantities; they have experience; new certificate holders do not. Such action, however, decreases the likelihood of females gaining access to the superintendency in the region because so few currently fill the ranks of the superintendency in the northwest (Wolverton, Rawls, Macdonald & Nelson, 2000). Further, much of the research on women in the superintendency suggests that they take a different path to that position than do white males, which could hamper their chances of gaining the administrative and leadership experience deemed necessary by boards and search consultants (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Logan, 1999; Sharp, 1991; Shary, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2000; Tallerico, 2000a).

The objective of the study reported in this paper was to determine the most commonly exercised path to the superintendency in the northwest. In addition, we compared career trajectories across four subgroups of study participants—male and female superintendents and male and female certificate holders who are not superintendents. In the first instance, we sought out any commonalities between the routes chosen by current male and female superintendents in the study. In the second, we examined the career choices of potential superintendency applicants to determine whether they were actually gaining the types of administrative experience that school

[1] Almost 40% of superintendents in the study reported in this paper planned to retire within three years.

boards and search consultants believe to be necessary. We end the paper with implications for practice based on study findings.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership development is a process that extends over many years (Gardner, 1987). It comprises three components: an *understanding of the desired position*, *skill development*, and practice and time to reflect, which can only be gained through *experience* (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). Schön (1983) contends that this third dimension is crucial. For leaders to be successful, they must engage in reflective practice. That, indeed, their ability to reflect on what they do as they gain administrative experience is central to dealing with the uncertainty, instability, and conflict, which occur in today's organizations (Gabarro, 1985; Kowalski, 1999; McAdams, 1995).

Where the superintendency is concerned, we tend to concentrate on the first two aspects of leadership development. Volumes have been written about the roles and responsibilities of the superintendency (McAdams, 1995; Blumberg, 1985; Kowalski, 1999). We understand what they do. Similarly, we have developed highly sophisticated certification programs that focus on skill development. This is an important consideration for districts in the northwest because four of the five states in the region require superintendent certificates upon application. Even though Washington does not require a certificate, 80% of its superintendents hold the credential. In fact, only one person in the study did not possess a superintendent's certificate.

In contrast, we assume that aspirants to the superintendency gain the experience they need by working in a variety of school administrative posts. But, do they? Are they taking positions that provide them with the right types of experience and the opportunity to reflect on practices that relate to the superintendency?

The most current national study suggests that "moving through the ranks" does indeed characterize the typical career path to the superintendency (Tellerico, 2000b). Most began as teachers, followed by one of two administrative paths. Over 48% of superintendents in the study had moved from positions as assistant principal or principal to central administration to superintendent. Another 31% had transitioned directly from either assistant principal positions or principalships to superintendencies (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000). Others confirm that, especially for men, the path to the superintendency is through the assistant high school principal and high school principal offices (Kowalski, 1999; Tallerico, 2000b).

In fact, many respondents to a study conducted by McAdams (1995) named the high school principalship as the position in the district most clearly resembling the superintendency. They felt that these two positions are alike not only in the variety of complex issues that arise but in the degree of community visibility associated with them (Tallerico, 2000b). Indeed, applicants with experience in managing finances, facilities, operations, personnel, and board-community relations, which might be gained as a high school principal, prove attractive to school boards (Pringle, 1989). Consultants also viewed the rise to the superintendency from this position as being an easier route than going from the elementary principal position, which has traditionally been heavily populated by women (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Tallerico, 2000a). The rarity of women in the high school principal position has made it difficult for search consultants, who rely on this paradigm as a reflection of acceptable practice, to recruit women for available positions. Consequently, because search consultants have, to a great extent, become the gatekeepers to the superintendency, such a mind-set on their part could prove lethal to female aspirants (Brunner, 1999; 2001; Chase & Bell, 1990; Björk, 2000).

The Study

Recently, Washington State University's Center for Academic Leadership surveyed over 1,900 superintendents and superintendent certificate holders in the five-state region (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington) served by the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (Wolverton, Rawls & Macdonald, 2000).[2] The overall response rate was 61%. The instrument comprised of three sections. The first section asked for general demographic information, such as current position, education, income, types of administrative experience, whether a respondent had ever applied for a superintendent position (and if so how many times), and whether he/she planned to apply for the position within the next three years. The other two sections queried respondents as to reasons for applying or not applying for the superintendency. The data reported in this paper comes from the first section of the survey.

Methodology

To gain a clearer understanding of the career paths of superintendents and potential superintendents, we computed percentages of administrative experience held by four populations (male and female superintendents and male and female non-superintendents) across five positions—elementary principal, middle school principal, high school vice principal, high school principal, assistant superintendent, and other central administration. In addition, we created several composite variables, which combined various types of administrative experience.

We then tested for differences between male and female superintendents, male and female non-superintendents, and across the subpopulations—male superintendents and non-superintendents, female superintendents and non-superintendents, and superintendents as a whole against non-superintendents—to determine whether differences that existed for positions identified by the literature as key were significant. (Note: we used *t* tests and *t* tests for paired samples in this part of the analysis.) Key positions tested included high school principal, assistant

[2] Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory sponsored this study.

superintendent, and central administrator. The composite experience variables, while reported in Table 3, yielded little addition information and were subsequently dropped from the analysis.

General Demographics of Respondents

Twenty percent of the respondents were women (173 nonsuperintendent certificate holders and 67 superintendents). Forty-four percent (522) of the respondents were superintendents. On average, respondents were 53 years of age with the youngest being 31years old and the most senior, 78 years. Most were married (88%) and had been in their current positions for six years, on average (ranging from less than one to more than 30 years). Of those respondents who provided information about their salary levels, two-thirds earned $80,000 or less, with two respondents reporting salaries of less than $40,000 (one male, one female; both from Montana). Overall, 35% of the respondents worked in districts serving fewer than 1,000 students. The remainder were equally divided between districts with 1,000 to 4,999 students and districts with over 5,000 students. One-third (191 superintendents and 146 non-superintendents) plan to retire within the next three years. (See Table 1 and 2 for visual depictions of the demographic profiles of superintendents and non-superintendent certificate holders.)

Superintendents and non-superintendents bore similar profiles at least on key comparable elements.[3] They were close in age and education attainment. Most in both groups were married. Even their years of administrative experience did not vary greatly. Non-superintendents tended to be in their current positions longer, however, than were superintendents. If we look at both superintendents and non-superintendents across gender, we see some differences. Women in both groups were less likely to be married than were their male counterparts. They had less administrative experience and had been in their current positions for shorter time periods. They also tended to be more highly educated with 52% of the female superintendents and 41% of the

[3] Salaries, for instance, proved difficult to compare since respondents function at different levels and fall on pay scales accordingly.

female non-superintendents possessing doctorates. Comparable percentages for men in the sample were 32% and 30%, respectively.

The Career Not Chosen

Interestingly, potential aspirants to the superintendency seem to have a fair idea of *what the job entails*. In fact, they reject the notion of even seeking the position. Of the entire sample (excluding those who were already retired), only 25% planned to apply for the superintendency within the next four years, and that percentage includes some current superintendents who plan to relocate in other districts in the near future. Of the 259 prospective applicants, 140 are current superintendents who expect to apply for other superintendencies; 119 hold certificates but are not current superintendents.

A mere 18% of the women in this pool (39 either current superintendents or new applicants entering the pool) plan to apply for a superintendency. Such a finding mirrors that of Gupton and Slick (1996), who found that career aspirations of women typically fall short of the superintendency. Instead, women in their study saw themselves in support roles. Numerous studies, over time, confirm that lower career goals correlate strongly with lack of career advancement in women (Bonuso & Shakeshaft, 1982; Thomas, 1986; Weber, Feldman & Poling, 1981).

Consistently, aspects of the job, such as stress, politics, dealing with the media, low pay differential between current position and superintendency, and working with school boards, influenced the decision not to apply for the remaining 393 potential applicant pool members (certificate holders who were not superintendents and who did not plan to retire). Each reason tends to carry negative connotations (Wolverton, Rawls, Macdonald, & Nelson, 2000).

In addition, members of the potential applicant pool seem to have worked at *skill development*. Over one-third of them held doctorates. All others had earned masters, and most

of these administrators had taken extra course work beyond the masters' level (62%). Almost all of the respondents held superintendent certificates, on average for 16 years. Shortcomings of certification programs notwithstanding, we can, at a minimum, say that this applicant pool has been involved in some skill building.

The Path Not Taken

It is the *experience* piece that we believe is more telling. Not only do prospective candidates shy away from the position because of its perceived undesirableness, they may, in fact, be opting out of the career trajectory that most readily leads to today's superintendency. If we look at the career trajectories of current superintendents in the northwest, we find that they resemble those of superintendents in other parts of the country.

Men tended to move from the high school principalship, and women from assistant superintendent and central administration positions, to the superintendency. (The differences in each case were statistically significant.) Almost 60% of current male superintendents had been high school principals. (Somewhat counter to other research findings, few [26%], however, had been high school vice principals.) In contrast, less than one-quarter of female superintendents had held this post. Proportionally more of the women had been either assistant superintendents (43%) or in other central administrative positions (45%). Less than 30% of male superintendents had held either position prior to becoming a superintendent. If the male career trajectory is the commonly expected model in the northwest, this might help explain why we find so few women in the superintendency; they simply matriculated up the wrong career ladder.

When we examine the prospective pool, we see what appears to be an interesting trend developing. More men than women have been or currently are high school principals and more women are central administrators (p-value = .000). When we compare administrative experience of non-superintendents with that of current superintendents, partial consistency exists in the career

trajectory in females. Similar percentages of applicant pool women (23%), compared to current female superintendents (24%), are taking high school principalships; but significantly fewer non-superintendents seem to be taking assistant superintendent positions (29% as compared to 43% of the current superintendents who said they had been assistant superintendents). Similarly, in the male applicant pool, fewer are taking high school principalships (44% as compared to 56% of current superintendents who said they had held this position), the traditional jumping off point for males interested in the superintendency.

The striking departure for both males and females in this group comes at the central administrative position, and it seems to reflect a conscious decision to move away from the accepted superintendency career trajectory. Forty percent of males in the potential applicant pool and over 60% of females have central administrative experience. This is a marked increase of almost 20% for both groups. In general, significantly fewer members of the applicant pool than current superintendents possess high school principal experience, and far more have spent time in central administration (p-value = .000). (See Tables 3 and 4.)

If we assume that both the route through the high school principalship and through central administration (including the assistant superintendency) are viable avenues to the superintendency in the northwest, then we must consider whether both men and women are purposefully stopping out at one of the mid-level administrative career rungs. In essence—saying "thanks but no thanks" to the superintendency (Houston, 1998).

The conclusion might be drawn that instead of aggressively pursuing high school principalships or assistant superintendencies in preparation for a superintendency, these potential applicants are finding that they can be involved at the district level but avoid the pitfalls and hassles of the superintendency by taking central administrative positions, such as director of

curriculum and instruction or educational technology director. They simply learned vicariously the ins and outs of the superintendency and found the position wanting (Bandura, 1977).

Implications

One stark implication is that the pool of viable candidates for the superintendency may actually become smaller over the next ten years as more people (both men and women) decide life is too short to spend it in a highly scrutinized, crisis-ridden position. (See also Cunningham & Burdick (2000) for similar findings.) Candidates may be hesitant to enter a position where their authority is undermined by what they see as board and community interference and a lack of job security.

Another implication may be that female administrators climb a career ladder that does not quite reach the top. Some women falsely believe the myth that by being loyal and remaining an assistant superintendent that when the current superintendent leaves they will inherit the position (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999). The reality is that when change does occur school boards are not looking from within for a replacement. Rather, they look at existing superintendents in other districts or newly retired superintendents to serve as interims (most of whom are men). And, if they look beyond this pool, they often search for applicants who have had high school principal experience (Tallerico, 2000a, 2000b). In response, states in the northwest, and perhaps, the region in totality, must embark on concerted efforts to identify and mentor female leaders. Mentors provide essential support and insights into the inner workings of the system. Those who lack mentors more often than not find themselves excluded and discounted as potential superintendents (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000).

One of the "main impediments to women's career advancement [however] seems to be the unstated and understood requirements that aspiring candidates must look and act like those already in power (Gupton & Slick, 1996, p. ??). In fact, "the U.S. Census Bureau characterizes

the superintendency as the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States" (Björk, 2000, p.17). In career trajectory terms, that means matriculation should occur from highly visible administrative positions, like the high school principalship, to the superintendency. Something increasing numbers of women are not doing (Grogan, 1996). With the number of women in advanced degree programs outweighing the men in those programs as well as the number of women in central office positions, it is apparent that women are not only equipping themselves for top administrative positions but making attempts to reach them. The question remains: does the ladder they are using reach the top?

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Table 1: Limited Profile of Superintendents (n = 522)			
	Entire Pool	**Male**	**Female**
Male	87%	455	67
Female	13%		
White (20 minority sups)	98%		
Single	4%	2%	6%
Married ***	88%	91%	72%
Divorced ***	4%	.3%	12%
Education Level			
Masters **	5%	6%	0%
Masters Plus **	60%	62%	48%
Doctorate ***	34%	32%	52%
Years Admin. Exp. ***		19.7	15.8
Yrs. in Present Position**		5.6	4.2
Age	53 years	53	53

** p-value = .05 or better (comparing men and women)

*** p-value = .01 or better (comparing men and women)

Table 2: Limited Profile of Non-Superintendents (n = 658)			
	Entire Pool	**Male**	**Female**
Male	74%	485	173
Female	26%		
White (33 minority sups)	95%		
Single ***	37%	1%	.09
Married ***	87%	92%	.75
Divorced ***	6%	4%	.11
Education Level			
Masters *	3%	3%	.03
Masters Plus ***	63%	65%	.57
Doctorate ***	38%	30%	.41
Age	53.5 years	54	52
Years Admin. Exp. ***	17.75	19.25	13.6
Yrs. In Pres. Position***	6.8	7.4	5.1
Year Certified		1983	1988
Will Apply (% of Pool)	119 (23%)	91 (19%)	28 (16%)

* p-value = .1 or better (comparing men and women)

** p-value = .05 or better (comparing men and women)

*** p-value = .01 or better (comparing men and women)

Table 3: Administrative Experience of Superintendents & Non-Superintendents by Gender

	Current Superintendents		Non-Superintendents	
	% of Men	% of Women	% of Men	% of Women
Elem. Principal	.50	.57	.49	.50
Mid. Principal	.39	.22	.28	.21
H.S. Vice Prin.	.26	.22	.30	.26
High School Prin.	.56	.24	.44	.23
Asst. Super.	.28	.43	.30	.29
Other Central Adm	.24	.45	.40	.61
Elem. & Mid. Prin.	.27	.12	.21	.12
Mid. & H.S. Prin.	.27	.10	.21	.10
Mid. & Elem. Prin.	.28	.06	.51	.08
H.S. V.P. & Prin.	.18	.10	.19	.13
Elem., Mid., H.S.	.16	.04	.10	.06
Principal at least one level	.83	.79	.82	.71

Table 4: Significant Differences in Position by Subpopulations

High School Principal	Assistant Superintendent	Central Administrator
Superintendents Men*** vs. Women	Superintendents Men vs. Women*	Superintendents Men vs. Women***
Non-superintendents Men*** vs. Women		Non-superintendents Men vs. Women***
	Women Superintendents** vs. Women Non-superintendents	Women Superintendents vs. Non-superintendents**
Men Superintendents** vs. Men Non-superintendents		Men Superintendents vs. Men non-superintendents***
Superintendents*** vs. Non-Superintendents		Superintendents vs. Non-superintendents***

* p-value = .1 or better (comparing men and women)
** p-value = .05 or better (comparing men and women)
*** p-value = .01 or better (comparing men and women)

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